

**ERD 2021**  
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**COMPARATIVE APPROACHES IN STUDYING TEACHER  
EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH AND  
INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES**

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**Abstract**

This work was presented as the keynote address at the Education, Reflection, Development International Conference. As teacher education programs and teacher educators continue their work in imparting robust and sound pedagogical knowledge, they also need to acknowledge the enriching nature of a comparative perspective in the practice and research on teacher education. Thus, including comparative methods in examining teacher education both within and across a program's national borders offers teachers-to-be a window into an array of teaching practices in a global setting. Developing an awareness, interest and inclination toward a comparative perspective-taking in teacher education is paramount in forming the new generations of teachers and researchers on teacher education. At the same time, teacher education programs benefit from collaborations across national and cultural settings, allowing them the possibility to co-learn what approaches may work in meaningfully adjusting their curricular organization to prepare teachers for an interconnected world in which their students truly become global citizens.

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## 1. Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to be in your presence again this year, even though for the second year in a row we are constrained to communicate in an online environment. First of all, I would like to congratulate my colleagues, who are also the organizers of this conference, now at its ninth edition, for their diligence and perseverance in planning this significant academic event, all the while ensuring its steady growth in intellectual engagement and quality over this time. Hence, I am very honored to give one of the opening presentations and I would like to thank you for the privilege you granted me through this generous gesture. In turn, I can only hope that my presentation will rise to your expectations.

Before I begin delving into the intertwined themes of my presentation, allow me to provide a brief history of my collaboration with our distinguished colleagues in the Department of Educational Sciences (DSE) here at Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai (UBB). I think this is relevant for a comparative perspective-taking, both given my training at the intersection of Comparative and International Education (CIE) and Teacher Education (T.Ed.), and the comparative research projects in which we have been engaged. It is also fitting to take stock of this partnership and its timeline today, given that it is precisely ten years ago this month that the seeds of this collaborative relationship were planted.

My personal connection with UBB has been developing since 2008, when I approached the current director of mobilities in the Centre for International Cooperation to request information about potential participants in a, partly comparative, research project I was conducting at that time. After I moved into my current position at North Dakota State University (NDSU), I sought to establish and formalize an institutional partnership between my new host institution and UBB, with the purpose and aims of creating the conditions for future mutually beneficial collaborations among members of our institutions. Consequently, the first chance I had to move in that direction came during my visit at the DSE in the late spring-early summer of 2011, when I met and had a fruitful conversation with the director of the department at the time, Professor Vasile Chis, but also met several other distinguished colleagues who are in this virtual audience right this moment.

From that point on, a series of subsequent visits to UBB and DSE, in particular, cemented both institutional and individual academic partnerships up to this day. For instance, on a follow-up visit in October 2011, our colleagues and friends set up a departmental meeting to receive the interdisciplinary delegation I was leading in our efforts to create a vibrant partnership across multiple lines of academic inquiry and practice. Later visits followed, although with a narrower scope, primarily to reinforce the various facets of the collaboration between our departments. For example, on several occasions I brought students in our T.Ed. program at NDSU to learn about teaching, teacher education, schooling and educational practice in Romania through my short-term study abroad program. This gave them the opportunity to compare their conceptions of teaching they acquired at home with those they were being exposed to and learned about through lectures given by our colleagues in the DSE and via on-site school visits in Cluj, where they witnessed first-hand teaching practices in the Romanian setting.

Apart from the study abroad program, our colleagues at DSE have honored me with their virtual presence from a distance (and this was long before our current predicament) in educating our students at NDSU about education in Romania in several of the comparative education courses I have taught and co-taught over the years. Needless to say that, when given the opportunity on my visits to UBB, I returned

the favor by imparting perspectives and responding to questions on aspects of teaching and teacher education in the United States about which students in the DSE teacher preparation program were curious.

In subsequent years of continued visits to DES and sustained dialogue with my colleagues, we explored research ideas, which materialized in a couple of long-term comparative research projects, one of which has already resulted in a publication in one of the top three journals in CIE, namely Compare. Soon after that, we set out to pursue a follow-up comparative project on transition to teaching, which generated interest among two Israeli colleagues, both partners of the DSE programs, who are also here today. This project has been underway for the past three years, as data collection in cross-national settings with different curricular, organizational and contextual differences can present challenges to the researchers.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Before I conclude this summary overview of the history of collaboration between our two institutions, departments and colleagues, I would like to take a moment to define my positionality and situatedness in this collaborative context. I was born and raised in Romania, so I spent my formative years up until early adulthood in this country. I did not attend UBB, but nonetheless, I obtained my first undergraduate degree in Romania. Soon after that, my educational journey took me to the United States where it culminated with a doctoral degree in international education. I am not referencing my personal and academic background out of an inflated sense of self-importance or a need for reaffirmation of my accomplishments. Rather, I found it relevant to mention it here because, as a product of two educational systems and/or settings, it allows me to engage in comparative perspective taking that straddles two cultures, brings to the fore the interpretive nuances I need to be aware of in analyzing cross-national contexts and gives me a unique view, both as an insider and as an outsider of each educational system. Certainly, this shared comparative perspective provides a more critical and multifaceted lens in interpreting phenomena, processes, structures, behaviors or organizational aspects of educational systems, which is particularly critical in our multicultural and interconnected world of research and teaching.

- Against this background, I will now turn my attention to the intertwined relationships between CIE and T.Ed., and will reflect on aspects related to research and teaching in T.Ed. through a comparative lens. I will start with the research component, then transition into a discussion on instructional practice.

## **3. Research Questions**

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#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Although not immediately evident, CIE and T.Ed. have nonetheless long been associated fields and they have intersected throughout their historical development as fields of scholarly inquiry and practice. From early on, comparativists were not only concerned with an overall analysis of educational systems between countries, but were also interested to a large extent in the very teaching practices occurring in those systems. For instance, early 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar Marc Antoine Jullien de Paris, considered as one of the founders of the field of comparative education (Epstein, 2017) advocated for the establishment of a Normal Institute of Education for Europe to provide training for teachers in the most advanced teaching techniques available at the time on the continent (Hayhoe et al., 2017). Through the publication of regular reports containing comparative data on teaching across countries in Europe the institute would have informed not only the managers of educational apparatuses, but more importantly, the teachers themselves would have learned about practices in other countries and avoided being easily manipulated by those who controlled the educational systems in which they practiced their profession.

This focus on teaching and teachers in the comparative study of educational systems remained at the core of the field's scholarly pursuits, but contextual factors or phenomena outside the schools also became aspects worthy of closer examination. Nonetheless, in his often quoted address at the Guildford Educational Conference in October 1900, Michael Sadler contemplated the benefits teachers may derive from opportunities to learn about teaching practices and educational systems in other countries by experiencing them first hand:

It would be an excellent thing if considerable numbers of our experienced teachers, both in secondary and in elementary schools, could be sent abroad and to America, in order to see and to judge, and then to tell us when they returned home whether some of the things which they had seen abroad were not an improvement on what is ordinarily done at home. (as cited in Bereday, 1964b, p. 311)

#### **5. Research Methods**

An extensive account of the historical development of CIE is neither necessary nor practical in this space, yet it should be noted that even from the mention of these two notable early scholars in the field, a

dichotomous epistemology of research paradigms ensued. Two research traditions seemed to contour and inform the field, namely *positivism* and *relativism* (also referred to as *contextualism*). Without going into much detail here, scholars in the former tradition, sought to apply the scientific method in the comparative study of educational systems, through the formulation of hypotheses regarding discrete and observable variables that lead to generalizable conclusions about the characteristics of educational systems. In turn, scholars in the latter tradition considered that any observation and analysis of educational phenomena needed to be observed as embedded in their particular social, cultural and historical contexts in order to make holistic sense of the functioning of educational systems. Thus, epistemologically, the two traditions could not be further apart and seemed to be eternally irreconcilable as scholars adhering to either tradition disputed the merits of the other in the comparative study of education (Epstein, 2008).

## 6. Findings

In general terms, subsequently scholars in the positivist realm embraced theoretical lenses informed by structural-functionalist approaches such as human capital or modernization theories, along with Marxist orientations exemplified by dependency theory. Conversely, relativists adopted post-modernist or post-structuralist paradigms expressed through critical theories, liberation theory, ecological theories, post-colonialism or feminism (Kubow & Fossum, 2007). More recently, this repertoire has expanded to globalization theories or post-foundational approaches to comparative education and certainly, the terrain is more mixed today, with scholars employing mixed methodologies and theoretical framework.

Certainly, comparative studies in teacher education have been informed by these epistemological approaches. Interest in comparative research in T.Ed. has expanded over the past two to three decades, particularly as the move towards accountability, particularly in North America and parts of Europe has led to a curiosity with comparisons of teaching effectiveness, teaching quality, assessment of learning outcomes, professionalization of teaching and teacher education, etc. This interest is evidenced in part by the increasing comparative research literature particularly in international perspective, primarily in scholarly journals, but also in dedicated volumes on explorations of teacher education in cross-national, cross-cultural or international contexts. For example, at the time of writing, a basic search for the term *teacher education* in the top-three comparative education journals yielded a combined result of over 7,000 articles spanning over three decades. In addition, comparative studies in specialized journals on teacher education also contain a substantial and growing number of articles. Substantial attention devoted to comp studies in T.Ed in JTE, EJTE, APJTE.

Notwithstanding this growing trend, comparative studies in teacher education have been criticized for their rather limited scope, tendency for undertheoretization, attempts to generalize findings from small-scale studies or the cursory attention given to historico-socio-cultural contexts in which teacher education and the teaching practice operate (Afdal, 2019; Tatto & Menter, 2019). By the same token, the methodological approaches in teacher education research, including in comparative perspective, have been scrutinized and found to trend predominantly toward small-scale, qualitative, rather than large-scale, quantitative approaches (Mayer & Oancea, 2021). This general orientation towards small-scale studies

may be explained through the uniqueness and contextual nature of teacher education programs and the difficulty in extrapolating findings to larger system levels even within one country, particularly in federal-type, decentralized education systems such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, Switzerland or Belgium to name just a few. It may also be explained by what has been termed as the “practical turn” in teacher education (Crossley & Watson, 2009), which has led to a narrowing focus on the acquisition of discrete skills in teacher education programs. This is particularly the case in North America and the United Kingdom, where the movement to professionalize teacher education and develop standardized accountability and performance assessment criteria have led to an emphasis on a limited pedagogical content knowledge repertoire at the expense of minimizing or excluding more holistic conceptualizations of teaching expertise. This marginalizes subjects in the teacher education curriculum deemed as impractical, such as the history of education, sociology of education and, most relevant in this discussion, comparative education.

As a consequence, research studies presumably follow this trend, as structural and organizational aspects of teacher education programs, thus limited by the pragmatic orientations in curriculum design, inform the extent, nature and elements of comparisons. Furthermore, a limiting component in comparative teacher education studies rests with the unit of analysis. Over time, comparative education literature has devoted much attention to considerations and definitions of units of analysis in CIE research (Bereday, 1964a; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). More recently, in their edited volume on approaches and methods in comparative education research, Bray et al. (2016) identified a number of categories of “units of comparison,” including places, systems, times, cultures, values, policies, curricula, race, gender and class, etc. This speaks to the varied landscape of CIE research, as well as to the range and levels at which the researcher can focus her or his attention. In comparative teacher education research, the specific and contextual nature of teacher education programs routinely constrains the researchers to narrower units of comparison, given the difficulty in defining easily transferrable elements of comparison across programs or systems. What is defined as teacher effectiveness or teacher quality may have different connotations across national or even intra-national contexts, therefore posing difficulty in making holistic interpretations at broader systemic levels.

Having sketched out some of the fundamental premises and vexing issues of comparative research in teacher education, next I would like to discuss the approach we took in our collaborative project with my colleagues at UBB. To illustrate this, I will briefly review the main aspects of the research study we undertook, comparing the teacher education programs at our respective institutions, namely NDSU and UBB (Salajan et al., 2017). First, in terms of a conceptual framework, we employed a framework for creating effective teacher education programs developed by Darling-Hammond and her colleagues. Some of the elements of this framework consisted of, among others, the formulation of a coherent program vision, a conscious bridging of theory and practice, thoughtfully designed field experiences, use of active pedagogy or meeting the needs of diverse learners. Second, the data collection instrument which sought responses from teacher candidates on their experience in our programs was closely aligned with the components of this framework. Third, we deliberately contextualized the application of this instrument in extensive descriptions of both the histories, educational organization and curricular structures of the two programs and the larger societal settings in which they operate.

Following these steps, while we attempted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each program, we also carefully sought to avoid to contrast them against each other given the unique settings in which they function. Therefore, contextual interpretations of the findings were paramount, particularly as neither program was actually representative of the entire teacher education system in which they were embedded. In the final analysis, we were able to draw inferences on the commonalities and differences of teacher education across these two contexts, which is what a comparative approach would have yielded, but were also cognizant that these contrasting features can only explain to a limited extent the intricate nature and developmental paths of the two programs. In turn, we acknowledge that the study may be subjected to some of the same criticism I alluded to earlier. For instance, the study was anchored in what may be considered a rather practice-oriented than a theoretical framework and, therefore, not conducive to generating new theoretizations of teacher education functions in comparative perspective. It was also based on small-scale samples, only partly representative of the socio-cultural context informing and surrounding them. However, all these are valuable lessons learned, both in terms of comparative aspects of our programs and in further refining our research approach for our future collaborative projects.

The curriculum in preservice teacher education is understandably geared towards ensuring that future teachers are equipped with the requisite subject content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and teaching dispositions, so they may successfully perform and accomplish their teaching expectations. Any curriculum designed for these purposes will necessarily weigh the content it includes against the academic and professional standards stipulated by accreditation or certification organizations, whether governmental or non-governmental, the approval of which is expected and paramount for their functioning.

In the United States, the curricular choices and planning teacher education programs make in this regard are informed by such accreditation bodies as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), formerly known as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). In this process, preservice teacher education programs are built around a required core of professional education courses, aligned with accreditation standards. Over time, this core has contracted to focus primarily on subjects related to, among others, foundations of teaching, educational psychology, classroom management, instructional planning and methods, assessment and teaching diverse learners. A typical T.Ed. program in the United States leaves very little room for electives outside this professional education core and courses narrowly related to teaching the teacher candidates' chosen content area. The tendency towards a curriculum contraction may be attributed to the turn towards practice-based teacher education in the context of reform cycles promoted by policymakers over time. This brought teacher education under scrutiny as a contested educational policy-making terrain, the result of which was a move to induce a competence-based approach in teacher education in the 1970s (Grossman et al., 2018). In recent years, efforts to underscore teacher accountability, quality or effectiveness resulted in a gradual infusion of teacher education programs with these concepts as part of the process of professionalization in teacher education (Janssen et al., 2014; Zeichner, 2012).

In this context, as noted earlier, although it was a core component of teacher education in the 1960s and 70s, the practical turn resulted in the marginalization and eventual exclusion of comparative and international education as a required subject matter from university-based preservice teacher education curricula in North America, Ireland, the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe (Crossley

& Watson, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2008). The multiple benefits of a comparative perspective taking for preservice teacher education candidates' nuanced understandings about the world of teaching they experience in their own setting in the context of learning about other systems of education or teaching practices has been well-documented (Kubow & Fossum, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012).

Notwithstanding continued calls for a reconsideration of this approach, particularly as preservice teachers are increasingly expected to develop global or intercultural competences as they enter the profession (Aydarova & Marquardt, 2016), with few exceptions, comparative and international education remains relegated to an elective in most preservice T.Ed. programs. The utilitarian conception that has taken hold of the T.Ed. programs (Kubow & Blosser, 2016) remains an obstacle in infusing their curricula with comparative and international perspectives on teaching, and therefore the inclusion of CIE as a required subject.

Perhaps, the current inertial thinking may reverse its course as more scholars and practitioners advocate for the inclusion of CIE in teacher education, precisely because in an interconnected world of teaching, an understanding of the global phenomena, policies and practices that undergird teaching and education is fundamental for prospective teachers in inculcating in their students an awareness of their situatedness in the global community. To put it in the utilitarian and pragmatic framework currently governing teacher education, comparative perspective taking, particularly in international context, should represent core teaching skills for effective student learning and literacy about the co-dependencies of human action and changes it induces across the globe, as this has direct and indirect impact on the sustainability of all human societies. That is a core understanding that young learners need to be imparted by teachers trained in comparative understandings of educational systems, teaching practices and learning approaches around the world. For all intents and purposes, it follows that T.Ed. is the natural intellectual and practice-based home for CIE as these programs prepare future teachers to function in a world marked by increasing interdependencies across a multifaceted societal, cultural, economic, political and educational global landscape.

## **7. Conclusion**

In my own instructional practice in the T.Ed. program at NDSU, I have strived to enrich the teacher candidates' understanding of the world by infusing the courses I teach with brief segments of comparative and international perspectives on education or teaching in other parts of the world. Nonetheless, in the already compact and packed T.Ed. curriculum, there is very little room to devote anything but superficial attention and time to conceptions of teaching or explorations of educational systems around the world. Dedicating one class session over the course of a semester to such education outside U.S., does not do justice to the vastly intricate and complex educational structures, phenomena and their inter-relationships in the international arena. My sense was that this had to change and I decided to do something about it. As is the case with many other T.Ed. programs in the U.S., the T.Ed. program at NDSU is based on a core set of professional education courses that stray very little from the current cannon of the "practical turn." Therefore, the curriculum, primarily geared to prepare future high-school teachers, contains courses in the areas enumerated above, namely, foundations of education, educational psychology, instructional planning, to name just a few. Consistent with the literature reviewed here,



comparative and international education is not part of the core requirements of the program. Furthermore, at the time I joined the faculty in the department, the program also had no elective course in this area. Certainly, given my preparation as a comparativist, I regarded this absence of CIE in teacher education as a deficiency which had to be remedied. Not long after I started teaching in the department, I had the exciting opportunity to work with a colleague in the doctoral program to co-design and co-teach an introductory doctoral-level course in CIE. We set out to develop the framework, materials and mode of delivery for this course and had the chance to co-teach it at least three times before my colleague left the program for another professional opportunity.

Nonetheless, this experience further emboldened me to seek ways to provide a similar learning experience to my students in the T.Ed. program. Consequently, six years into my tenure in the program, I designed a course entitled *Teacher Education in International Comparative Perspective* to be offered as an elective to undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates in our program. Having gone through the longer-than-expected approval process, I finally offered and taught the course for the first time during the fall 2017 semester to three students, two at the graduate and one at the undergraduate level. Although this sounds like a rather limited and disappointing enrollment, given the relative absence of an institutional culture for internationalization and global engagement, I consider it a small step towards changing that perspective both in our program, department and, possibly, across the university.

Pedagogically and structurally, the course consists of weekly readings focused, in the first stage on developing an understanding of comparative education and comparative perspective taking. In subsequent sessions throughout the semester, the course is structured in two-week modules addressing teacher education systems on each continent. In each module, during the first week students conduct a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats or SWOT analysis of at least three countries' teacher education systems or environments which are then discussed in a roundtable format during class (the instructors also prepares an three-country analysis). The following week, a faculty member on campus, either from an international background or with experience in other educational systems, an international student or a scholar connecting via distance from a locale in the region under discussion that week is invited into the classroom. This invited guest (or guests, occasionally) presents and engages in a conversation with class members on aspects of teaching/teacher education in the country in which s/he has expertise, with the possibility of extending the discussion at regional level. Certainly, the SWOT analyses the class members conduct the week prior to the conversation with the invited guest serve as background literature and information to enrich the discussion by noting patterns, contrasting various teaching/teacher education settings, and delving deeper into the structural and contextual nature of those settings or systems. At the conclusion of this series of modules, students leave more informed and aware of the complexities, inequalities, challenges, but also possibilities in other teacher education or educational systems, a perspective they would have not acquired without opting for this course.

Certainly, one elective course in CIE offered in the program, which draws a low number of students given the already compressed curriculum cannot radically change the culture of comparative perspective and engagement with education globally overnight. Although I had the pleasure to teach the course again during the fall 2019 semester, again with an enrollment of two graduate students and one undergraduate student, I hold out hope that with subsequent offerings, the course will gain more traction. That is to say that, making it available to students in the program as often as possible may signal to

students in the program that this is a valuable component they should explore, until such time that the practical turn may wane again and CIE becomes mainstreamed again into T.Ed. curricula.

I have attempted here to offer an overview of the place of CIE both as a research and teaching component in T.Ed. It is evident to me that CIE is an indelible, critical and integral component of teacher education in both regards and I think this holds true across national contexts. It is as much valid in the United States as it is in Romania or any other country's educational system. In sharing my humble experiences in engaging in both the research and instructional practice of CIE in teacher education, I attempted to illustrate just some modalities in which we, as scholars, can promote the inclusion of comparative perspective taking and its advantages to developing in our teachers-to-be a comprehensive, pragmatic, yet sophisticated and thoroughly informed understanding of education at home and abroad. It is in our, their and their future students' interests that CIE and T.Ed. become and remain closely intertwined.

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